A Cruciform Key for Reading the Catholic Tradition: How to Embrace Catholic Practices Without Losing Protestant Faith

The Core Framework

This **hermeneutical** approach (a method of interpretation—how we read and understand texts and traditions) offers a way for those formed by Lutheran theology to engage deeply with Catholic spirituality, devotion, and practice—not by converting Catholic insights into a "**theology of glory**" (a way of thinking that emphasizes human achievement, spiritual success, and God's power revealed in strength), but by consistently interpreting them through the lens of the cross. Rather than treating the **theology of the cross** (Luther's insight that God is truly known in suffering, weakness, and hiddenness—especially in Christ crucified) as a competing system, this framework employs it as a **discipline of perception**—a way of seeing that allows genuine reception without abandoning theological commitments.

Nine Guiding Principles

1. The Cross as the Rule of Knowing

Theology begins not from spiritual attainment, metaphysical clarity, or moral success, but from the crucified Christ, in whom God chooses to be known under weakness, contradiction, and hiddenness. This **epistemological** (relating to how we know what we know) priority of the cross serves as the organizing principle for all theological understanding.

2. Wisdom Distinguished from Invulnerability

True theological wisdom is not the possession of error-proof insight, but the capacity to remain open to correction, repentance, and humiliation without fleeing from God. This distinction cuts beneath debates about doctrinal formulation to address the existential posture that theology requires—recognizing that the Christian remains *simul justus et peccator* (a Latin phrase meaning "simultaneously justified and sinner"—we are both forgiven by God and still struggling with sin) while embracing Catholic spiritual realism, as exemplified in Thérèse of Lisieux's "little way."

3. Humility as Epistemic Posture

Humility is not primarily a moral virtue but a way of knowing: a refusal to claim a vantage point beyond judgment, suffering, or the need for mercy. This **epistemic** humility (humility in how we claim to know things) shapes how we approach all theological reflection and spiritual practice.

4. Devotion as Ongoing Exposure, Not Ascent

Catholic devotional practices can be received fruitfully when they are understood not as steps toward spiritual mastery, but as repeated returns to dependence, confession, and grace. This reframes the entire trajectory of spiritual life and resonates with:

- The Catholic tradition of *conversio morum* (Latin for "ongoing conversion"—a commitment to continuous spiritual transformation)
- Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday (Christ's descent into godforsakenness—the theology of what happened between Good Friday and Easter)
- Franciscan poverty theology, which emphasizes dispossession rather than acquisition

5. The Saints as Witnesses, Not Guarantees

The saints are read not as evidence of achievable perfection, but as concrete witnesses to God's mercy working through weakness, failure, and endurance under the cross. While Catholic theology also emphasizes their *configuratio Christi* (Latin for "configuration to Christ"—being shaped or conformed to Christ's image)—a real transformation—this framework maintains that even **sanctification** (the process of being made holy) remains fundamentally passive and receptive rather than achievement.

The deeper question: Can transformation be affirmed without lapsing into glory-theology?

Working toward an answer:

Catholic theology makes strong claims about *real ontological change* in sanctification—something genuinely happens to you, not just a legal declaration about you. The tradition speaks of "infused grace," "merit" (however qualified), and genuine "cooperation" with God's work. This sounds like it contradicts the framework's insistence on passivity and receptivity.

But here Dominican theologian **Herbert McCabe** offers crucial clarity. McCabe argues that divine action and human action don't compete on the same plane—it's not that God does 60% and you do 40%. Rather, God's causality is of an entirely different order: God is the *ground* of your free action, not an alternative to it. Your cooperation is real and full, but your capacity to cooperate is itself wholly gift. As McCabe writes, grace doesn't "interfere" with human freedom; it *constitutes* it at a deeper level.

What this means: Catholic language about transformation and cooperation might be saying something the framework can affirm: that grace doesn't bypass your agency but heals and enables it. You genuinely act, but your action is never "yours" in a way that competes with it being God's gift. The saints cooperated fully with grace—and their cooperation was entirely God's work in them.

The remaining tension: Does "cooperation" still imply something you contribute that makes God's work efficacious? Catholic theology, even in McCabe's sophisticated form, retains language about "merit" and claims your transformed acts are genuinely pleasing to God *because of what you've become*. Lutheran theology worries this inevitably compromises grace's absolute priority. This framework proposes a cruciform reading: even "merit" language can be received as describing the fruits of gift, not the grounds of acceptance. But honest engagement requires acknowledging this remains a point of theological difference, not just linguistic variation.

For further study: Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (particularly chapters on grace and freedom); also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 109-114 (on grace), read alongside Lutheran responses in the *Formula of Concord*.

6. Sacramental Life Without Triumphalism

Sacraments (sacred rituals like baptism and communion where God promises to meet us) are approached not as confirmations of spiritual progress, but as God's descent to meet sinners where certainty, strength, and self-justification have failed.

The convergence and divergence:

The document's original claim that "there may be more convergence here than initially appears" requires unpacking. Both traditions want to affirm God's faithfulness in the sacraments—that they're reliable means of grace, not dependent on the minister's or recipient's worthiness. But they locate that reliability differently:

Catholic theology: *Ex opere operato* (Latin meaning "from the work having been worked") makes a specific metaphysical claim: the sacrament accomplishes something objective in the very performance of the rite. In baptism, for instance, original sin is removed and grace is *infused* into the soul as a real quality—something happens *in* the person through the sacramental act itself, whether they subjectively feel it or not.

Lutheran concern: If the sacrament "works" independently of faith, doesn't this risk treating it as quasi-magical? Lutherans insist sacraments require faith for efficacy—not that faith creates the grace, but that grace is only received through faith. The concern isn't just about "manipulation" but about where the sacrament's power actually resides.

McCabe's clarification: The Catholic claim isn't that sacraments work "automatically" like a vending machine. *Ex opere operato* means the sacrament is Christ's act, not primarily the minister's merit or the recipient's subjective state. But fruitful reception still requires faith. An infant baptized in the Church receives real grace, but that grace unfolds as the person grows in faith—it's not mechanical causation but God's faithful promise enacted sacramentally.

The cruciform reading: Both traditions can affirm sacraments as places where God comes to us in our weakness, not our strength. The metaphysical disagreement about infusion vs. imputation remains, but the existential posture can be shared: we come to the sacrament not because we're worthy but precisely because we're not. Whether grace is understood as infused quality or external promise, it meets us as *gift* when we're empty-handed.

The honest difference: Catholics and Lutherans still disagree about what ontologically happens in the sacrament and whether grace can be genuinely "present" apart from faith's reception. This framework doesn't dissolve that difference but suggests both traditions can practice sacramental humility even while disagreeing about sacramental metaphysics.

For further study: McCabe, "The Sacraments" in *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*; Lutheran-Catholic dialogue document *The Eucharist* (1978); Joseph Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us* (Catholic perspective); Robert Jenson, *Visible Words* (Lutheran perspective).

7. Mysticism Interpreted Through the Cross

Apophatic (from Greek meaning "negative"—a way of speaking about God by saying what God is *not*, emphasizing divine mystery beyond human words) and **mystical theology** (spiritual theology focused on direct experience and union with God) is received not as privileged access to divine heights, but as the stripping away of false lights that prepares the soul to be taught by the crucified Christ. This framing resonates deeply with John of the Cross's *nada* (Spanish for "nothingness"—the stripping away of all attachments to find God).

The challenge: Catholic mystical tradition doesn't only speak of stripping and darkness. It also uses language of "union," "**deification**" (the Eastern Christian teaching that humans can participate in God's divine nature), "spiritual marriage," and transformative vision that sounds like *arrival*—like you've gotten somewhere, achieved something, reached a destination.

The cruciform translation: This framework proposes reading all mystical "arrival" language as grammatical expressions of *intimacy-in-dependence* rather than *achievement-of-status*. When John of the Cross speaks of "spiritual marriage," he's describing radical receptivity and union with God's will, not graduation from neediness. When Eastern theology speaks of "deification," it means participation in divine life by grace, not becoming God by nature.

The test case: Can this framework do justice to texts that genuinely celebrate transformation, vision, and union without reducing them? Or does it inevitably translate mystical height into depth, mystical light into darkness, mystical arrival into ongoing journey?

Honest assessment: Some mystical texts resist this translation. When Teresa of Ávila describes the Seventh Mansion, she speaks of stable union and transformative joy that goes beyond mere "returning to neediness." The framework must wrestle with whether it's faithfully receiving this tradition or gently editing it.

A both/and possibility: Perhaps the mystics describe real transformation *and* ongoing dependence—not sequential stages but simultaneous realities. You are genuinely united to God (transformation is real) *and* you know this union only as utter gift (dependence remains total). If so, the framework's instinct is right but needs refinement: mystical "arrival" can be affirmed if it's understood as "arriving at the place where you receive everything."

For further study: John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* and *Spiritual Canticle*; Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*; Bernard McGinn's multi-volume *The Presence of God* (comprehensive history of Western Christian mysticism); Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (on apophatic mysticism).

8. Repentance as a Lifelong Mode of Being

The theology of the cross preserves Catholic practices of confession, examination, and penitence by refusing any narrative of arrival or spiritual completion. This maintains repentance not as an occasional event but as an ongoing posture before God. Both traditions can affirm this, though Catholics speak of "growth in holiness" alongside ongoing need for confession. The framework asks: can these both be true without contradiction?

9. Assurance Located *Extra Nos*

Confidence rests not in interior transformation or theological correctness, but in God's promise given in Christ, proclaimed and received amid ongoing fragility. *Extra nos* (Latin for "outside ourselves") means certainty is found not in our own spiritual state but in God's word to us.

Catholic complementarity: Catholic theology doesn't reject *extra nos* but adds that grace genuinely changes you *in* yourself—you're not just declared righteous but made righteous. The framework's concern is this could make assurance depend on detecting that interior change. Catholic response: assurance rests on God's promise in the sacraments and the Church's proclamation, not on measuring your progress. Both traditions can meet at "trust God's word, not your spiritual feelings."

The Method in Practice

This framework illuminates specific Catholic practices when read cruciformly:

The Rosary: Not as meritorious repetition but as the discipline of returning repeatedly to the mysteries of Christ's life, allowing them to inscribe themselves through sheer patient exposure.

Eucharistic Adoration: Not as gazing upon captured divinity but as learning to wait in the presence of the hidden God who gives himself under the most humble signs.

Examination of Conscience: Not as scorekeeping but as the daily return to honesty about one's ongoing need for mercy—a practice of epistemological humility.

Intercession of Saints: Not as leveraging their merit but as joining the communion of those who know themselves as beggars before God's grace.

Summary Insight

The Catholic tradition becomes most accessible when it is read not as a map of ascent, but as a treasury of practices, prayers, and witnesses that can only be rightly understood when the cross remains the final interpreter.

Within this framework, Catholic theology is neither rejected nor absorbed uncritically; it is received **cruciformly** (in a cross-shaped way—through the lens of Christ's suffering and weakness)—as material that continually returns the believer to humility, repentance, and trust in God's mercy alone.

The Broader Significance

What this articulates is essentially a **cruciform *ressourcement*** (*Ressourcement* is French for "return to the sources"—a 20th-century Catholic movement that went back to early Christian writings to renew theology)—a way of receiving the Catholic tradition that parallels what theologians like de Lubac and Congar attempted from within Catholicism itself: a return to sources that refuses the accretions of **triumphalism** (an attitude of spiritual victory and superiority), rationalism, and mechanistic **sacramentology** (the theology of how sacraments work).

The beauty of this approach is that it doesn't require Catholics to *become* Lutheran, nor does it ask Lutherans to ignore their theological commitments. Instead, it proposes a **shared**

posture—a standing beneath the cross together—from which both traditions can be read more truly.

Outstanding Questions

This hermeneutical key faces its most rigorous test when applied to the "hard cases":

- The **Marian dogmas** (official Catholic teachings about Mary, especially the **Immaculate Conception**—the belief that Mary was conceived without original sin)
- **Purgatory** (Catholic teaching about a state of purification after death before entering heaven) and prayers for the dead
- The **papacy** (the office and authority of the Pope) and **magisterial authority** (the teaching authority of the Catholic Church)

These represent areas for further development and testing of the framework. Can Marian doctrine be read as testimony to God's grace rather than human exceptionalism? Can purgatory be understood as final conformity to Christ rather than earning your way in? Can papal authority serve the gospel's humbling word rather than human certainty? These questions remain open.

What This Means for Regular People

If you're drawn to Catholic spirituality but worried about theological differences:

You don't have to choose between depth and faithfulness. This approach lets you pray the rosary, read the mystics, and learn from the saints—not as a spiritual ladder to climb, but as ways to keep returning to your dependence on God's mercy.

If you're exploring different Christian traditions:

The key insight is simple: every spiritual practice should humble you, not make you feel superior. If a prayer, devotion, or discipline draws you closer to recognizing your need for grace rather than your spiritual achievement, it's working correctly.

The practical takeaway:

Stand beneath the cross. Whether you're reading Teresa of Ávila, praying in a cathedral, or sitting with Augustine, ask: "Does this return me to humility, repentance, and trust in God's mercy alone?" If yes, you're reading it rightly. If it tempts you toward spiritual pride or self-sufficiency, you've drifted into what Luther called a "theology of glory."

In daily terms:

- Prayer isn't about getting good at praying—it's about showing up empty-handed.
- The saints aren't spiritual superheroes—they're people who kept falling into God's mercy.
- Sacraments aren't rewards for faith—they're how God meets us when we're weak.
- Spiritual growth isn't climbing higher—it's learning to receive more deeply.

This framework gives you permission to drink deeply from Catholic wells while staying rooted in the gospel truth: salvation is gift, not achievement; grace, not merit; Christ's work, not yours.

For Church Nerds, Scholars, and Clergy: A Research Map

On Grace, Transformation, and Cooperation:

- Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (especially "The Involvement of God")
- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 109-114 (read with Lutheran spectacles)
- Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification (1999)
- Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith* (Finnish Luther school on union with Christ)

On Sacramental Theology:

- Joseph Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us* (Catholic)
- Robert Jenson, *Visible Words* (Lutheran)
- Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* (post-scholastic Catholic approach)
- Herbert McCabe, "The Sacraments" in *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*

On Mystical Theology:

- Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God* series (authoritative historical survey)
- Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (on apophatic tradition)
- Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection* (Dominican approach to holiness)
- Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (cruciform reading of Christian mysticism)

On Ecumenical Method:

- Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Catholic engagement with Protestant concerns)
- Reinhard Hütter, *Dust Bound for Heaven* (Catholic who takes Reformed theology seriously)

- Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (Lutheran-Catholic-Orthodox synthesis)
- Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Luther's theology of the cross developed philosophically)

On the Theology of the Cross:

- Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*
- Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*
- Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (application to contemporary context)

Is McCabe an outlier?

No. McCabe represents a sophisticated Thomism shared by many 20th-century Catholic thinkers (the *nouvelle théologie* movement, including figures like de Lubac, Congar, and Chenu). He's writing in the tradition of Aquinas but with philosophical clarity that cuts through later scholastic accretions. His approach is mainstream among serious Catholic theologians, though his clarity and accessibility make him particularly valuable for Protestant engagement.

The invitation:

This framework is a beginning, not an ending. It offers a posture for engagement and suggests where bridges might be built. The real work happens when you read Catholic theology with Lutheran questions and Lutheran theology with Catholic depth—standing together beneath the cross, where all our systems are judged and all of us are saved by grace alone.